

Guide to supporting members with dementia

Purpose

This guide is designed for British Orienteering clubs, volunteers, coaches, and officials. Its purpose is to help clubs understand dementia, adapt activities, and create supportive environments so people living with dementia can remain active and included. It provides guidance on suggested best practice and is does not constitute clinical advice.

“A little understanding can make a big difference”

What is dementia?

The word ‘dementia’ describes a group of symptoms that may include memory loss, difficulties with thinking, problem-solving or language, and often changes in mood, perception or behaviour. These changes are usually small to begin with, but they can quickly begin to influence daily life.

A person who has dementia can continue to enjoy their hobbies, daily activities, friendships and relationships. As their condition progresses, they may need adjustments or extra support with these things. Everyone can play a part in supporting a person with dementia to live well and remain independent for as long as possible.

Dementia isn’t a natural part of ageing. It occurs when the brain is affected by a disease. There are more than 100 known types of dementia, the most common are Alzheimer’s disease and vascular dementia.

Dementia is not just about memory loss. It is a very multi-faceted condition. It can share many characteristics with other conditions, disabilities and impairments. Everyone experiences dementia differently.

A person with dementia might:

- Forget everyday information such as addresses, birthdays, or where equipment is stored.
- Struggle with decision-making, problem-solving, or following sequences of tasks.
- Have difficulties with language, such as following conversations or recalling words.
- Lose track of dates, locations, or familiar routes.

- Experience changes in mood and may show signs of frustration, anxiety, withdrawal, irritability.
- Have difficulty interpreting visual information (visuoperceptual difficulties, e.g. black might be seen as a void, flat lines can be seen as wavy).
- Show changes in behaviour, such as repetitive questioning, pacing, or agitation.

People living with dementia often want to stay active, remain part of their communities and continue doing activities they enjoy. British Orienteering, regional associations and local clubs can adapt to welcome and support members with dementia, along with their carers. Clubs that would like to become formally recognised as being [Dementia Friendly](#), can sign up to the Alzheimer's Society Dementia Friends scheme and may like to promote an individual as a Club Champion.

British Orienteering would like to challenge the stigma attached to dementia. We welcome and encourage open conversations and will challenge any discrimination.

Duty of care

Under British Orienteering's [Adult Safeguarding Policy](#), everyone involved in our sport has a shared responsibility to promote the safety and wellbeing of adults. If there are concerns that a member's physical or cognitive condition may affect their ability to participate safely, we have a duty of care towards them and should discuss these concerns with the individual in a respectful and person-centred way. We may suggest safer alternatives, such as choosing a shorter course or having a voluntary buddy or, if we believe the course will put an individual at risk, refuse their entry.

Any concerns should be raised with your Club Welfare Officer, and if further support is needed, the British Orienteering's Lead Safeguarding Officer. Any decisions about restricting participation will only be made through the appropriate safeguarding process.

Practical checklist for orienteering clubs

1. **Have a conversation:** Encourage the individual to have an open conversation with you. Understand what support they might want and need. Ensure you give them independence in creating their own action plan. You might need to include their carer in this conversation, with their consent.

2. **Agree what support the club can offer (see suggestions below).**

This may be;

- a. **Low** (repeating instructions, giving extra time, or untimed courses)
 - b. **Moderate** (advance information, simplified courses/maps)
 - c. **High** (escorted to start/finish, one to one support on course).
 - d. **Too risky – if the course/terrain presents too much of a risk to the individual, offer an easier alternative and/or refer to the CWO or LSO. You may need to refuse entry (see Duty of Care above).**
3. **Ensure you have emergency contact details for the member.** Some members may carry a GPS tracker or follow the [Herbert protocol](#).
 4. **Feedback.** After each adapted session, collect simple feedback; Was the pace ok? Did the terrain work? Was signage clear?
 5. **Celebrate success.** This raises awareness and helps with motivation and membership.
 6. **Review.** Dementia is a progressive condition and support needs will change over time. Clubs should regularly review the adjustments made.
 7. **Report.** If you are supporting a club member with Dementia, please inform British Orienteering to enable us to monitor and provide feedback. Any incidents should also be [reported](#) to British Orienteering so that we can reflect and improve our guidance and policies.

If you have any concerns about a member, please contact your Club Welfare Officer or the British Orienteering Lead Safeguarding Officer (telephone: 07891 091662 or email: safeguarding@britishorienteering.org.uk)

Based on [guidance](#) from Alzheimer's Society (UK), adaptations can be made in the following areas:

People - volunteers, members, coaches

- Provide dementia-awareness training for club volunteers/leaders
- Encourage patience, supportive language, and an inclusive mindset, focusing on what the person can do rather than what they've lost
- Offer a 'buddy' system, i.e. a volunteer who can support a person living with dementia (and possibly their carer) during orienteering events and activities

Programme - activities, event format

- Offer shorter, simpler courses (e.g. TD 1-3)

- Offer untimed runs to reduce time pressure
- Adapt training sessions to vary pace, complexity, length of course
- Incorporate socialisation and reminiscence: before/after the run, time for a chat, refreshments, memories of events. The social benefit is very important for many people living with dementia

Place - venue, terrain, signage, environment

- Avoid overly complex terrain or very remote locations
- Communicate in advance the map, meeting points, start/finish and any hazards
- Repeat info more than once, use visuals if possible

Consider the following potential adaptations when agreeing what support you can offer;

- Have a clear policy or statement: “Our club welcomes members with dementia, we can adapt sessions accordingly.”
- Promote dementia awareness training for your event Organiser and key volunteers
- Choose a venue that is familiar or easily accessible for people with dementia, including clear meeting points, toilets nearby and comfortable refreshments
- Use clear and prominent (eye level) signage for start, finish, toilets, car park etc
- Clearly mark boundaries, ensure no dangerous drop-offs or very remote sections
- Consider environmental factors such as less busy start times to reduce distractions and noise. People with dementia may not be able to filter out noise.
- Provide consistent contact with the same volunteers if possible.
- Provide map and course in advance.
- Provide pre-event information: explain what they’ll see, where they start, where they finish, toilets, refreshments (photos may help if possible).
- Offer a short walk-through of the start/finish, toilets and event arena before start.
- Permit and/or offer, participants to compete with a buddy who is competent and will stay with them. NB. If the buddy is not related to the competitor, they should be DBS checked, or equivalent. See [Safeguarding Checks](#)
- Advise participants to take a simple course, ideally avoiding rough terrain, dense vegetation and on clear paths on even ground.
- Offer untimed runs to take the pressure off and allowing the member to focus on navigation at their own pace.

- Provide a social wrap-up after the event, e.g. refreshments, time to chat, share photos/maps/experiences if they wish.
- Recognise that carers may accompany or participate; give them space and support.
- Include in event risk assessment – some areas will be risky than other, e.g. remote moorland, areas with vague boundaries.
- Promote inclusion. Ensure those members feel valued and part of the club culture.
- Promote and publicise being a dementia friendly club to your membership and the wider community.
- If using visual/hearing aids, gently check that the member is using them and they are correctly in use.
- Ensure the Club has a clear emergency escalation procedure to follow should a member not return within the expected time frame or if someone goes missing.

Communication

- Speak clearly, at a moderate pace, maintain eye contact and use their name
- Choose your words sensitively. People may respond better to gentle, descriptive language such as ‘Are you feeling a bit confused?’ rather than direct diagnostic terms like ‘Do you have dementia?’
- Use simple instructions, one step at a time. Avoid long lists of directions
- Use gentle prompts, do not make corrections and avoid quizzing
- Offer options, e.g. would you like to take a rest?
- Be aware of non-verbal cues, e.g. if someone looks confused, pause, offer help
- If someone appears lost or upset, gently guide them to their buddy or Event Organiser and or Welfare Officer

Useful resources

- [Dementia-friendly sports clubs & venues](#) - Alzheimer’s Society (UK)
- [Sport and dementia](#) – Dementia UK
- [Herbert protocol](#) - national scheme to help make sure that people living with dementia who are at risk of becoming lost can be found and brought home safely.
- [Print and online publications about dementia: Full list | Alzheimer's Society](#) – link to order or print resources to support member and/or promote awareness.